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## Excel's Custom Formats

ARTICLE DATE: 12.14.04

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Contributing editor Edward Mendelson wanted to format a cell in Excel so that if its value is positive, it is formatted with the Accounting format and looks like this: "\$ 456 ". But in the Accounting format, a zero is displayed as "\$ -", which was not suitable for his purposes. He wanted the cell to display a zero as the Currency format does, like this: "\$0", but to look like the Accounting format: "\$ 0".

Luckily, Excel's custom number formats are very flexible. An Excel number format can have up to four distinct sections separated by semicolons that define formatting for positive numbers, negative numbers, zero, and text items. Expressed as a custom format, the Accounting format with no decimals looks like this:

```
_( $* #,##0_ ); _ ( $* ( #,##0 ); _ ( $* "- "_ ); _ (@_ )
```

Each underscore creates a space the width of the character that follows it (the character itself is not displayed). In the Accounting format, negative values are enclosed in parentheses. The format for positive numbers ends with an underscore followed by a parenthesis, creating a space the width of the parenthesis. This keeps positive and negative numbers aligned with one another. An asterisk within a number format creates as many repetitions of the character that follows it as are needed to fill the available space. Here the asterisk followed by a space has the effect of "pushing" anything before the asterisk to the left edge of the cell.

To create your custom format, first format one cell with the Accounting format. Then select Custom. The current format will be copied into the custom format area. Modify the Accounting format to change the single dash to a zero, thus:

```
_( $* #,##0_ ); _ ( $* ( #,##0 ); _ ( $* "0" _ ); _ (@_ )
```

One more thing: If you wish, you can color-code any or all of the four portions. For example, it's not uncommon to show negative numbers in red:

```
_( $* #,##0_ ); [Red] _ ( $* ( #,##0 ); _ ( $* "0" _ ); _ (@_ )
```

Only eight colors are available: Black, Blue, Cyan, Green, Magenta, Red, White, and Yellow.

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